THREE CHRISTMAS TREES

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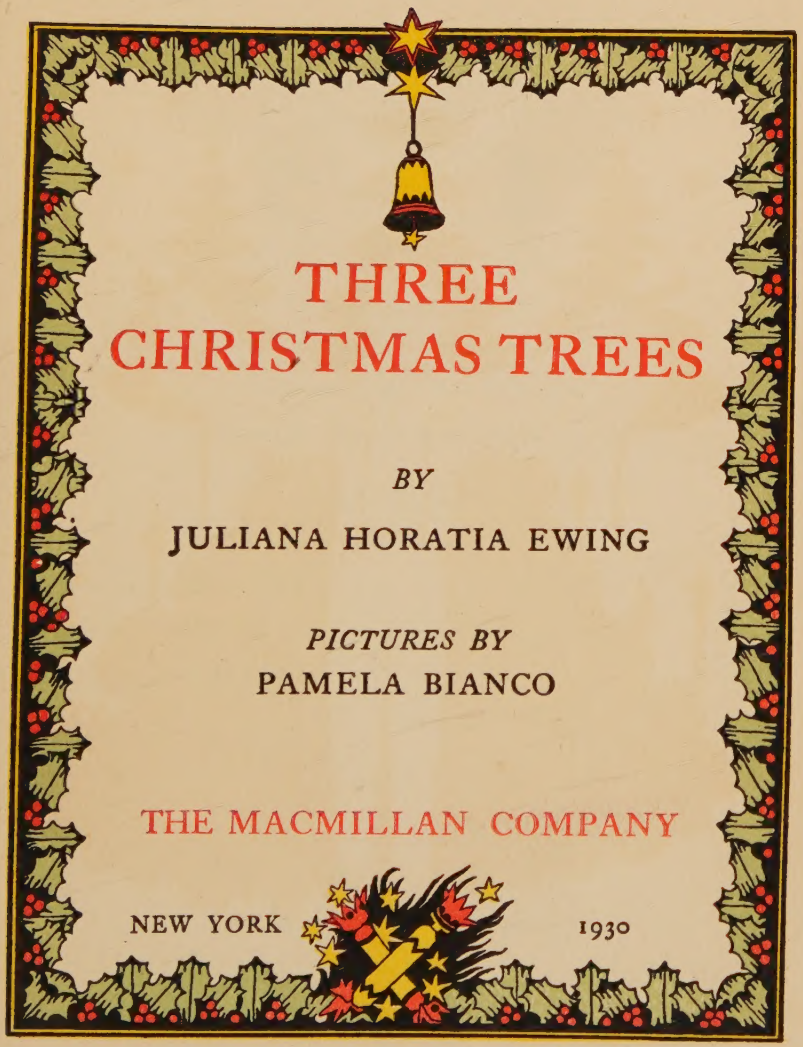

THREE CHRISTMAS TREES

BY

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THREE CHRISTMAS TREES

THREE CHRISTMAS TREES

THIS is a story of Three Christmas Trees. The first was a real one, but the child we are to speak of did not see it. He saw the other two, but they were not real; they only existed in his fancy. The plot of the story is very simple; and, as it has been described so early, it is easy for those who think it stupid to lay the book down in good time.

Probably every child who reads this has seen one Christmas tree, or more; but in the small town of a distant colony with which we have to do, this could not at one time have been said. Christmas trees were then by no means so universal, even in England, as they now are, and in this little colonial town, they were unknown. Unknown, that is, till the Governor's wife gave her great children's party. At which point we will begin the story.

The Governor had given a great many parties in his time. He had entertained big wigs and little wigs, the passing military, and the local grandees. Everybody who had the remotest claim to attention had been attended to: the ladies had had their full share of balls and pleasure parties: only one class of the population had any complaint to prefer against his hospitality; but the class was a large one—it was the children. However, he was a bachelor, and knew little or nothing about little boys and girls: let us pity rather than blame him. At last he took to himself a wife; and among the many advantages of this important step, was a due recognition of the claims of these young citizens. It was towards happy Christmas-tide, that "the Governor's amiable and admired lady" (as she was styled in the local newspaper) sent out notes for her first children's party. At the top of the notepaper was a very red robin, who carried a blue Christmas greeting in his mouth, and at the bottom—written with A. D. C.'s best flourish—were the magic words, *A Christmas Tree*. In spite of the flourishes—partly, perhaps, because of them—the A. D. C.'s handwriting, though handsome, was rather illegible. But, for all this, most of the children invited contrived to read these words, and those who could not do so were not slow to learn the news by hearsay. There was to be a Christmas Tree! It would be like a birthday party, with this above ordinary birthdays, that there were to be presents for every one.

One of the children invited lived in a little white house,

with a spruce fir tree before the door. The spruce fir did this good service to the little house, that it helped people to find their way to it; and it was by no means easy for a stranger to find his way to any given house in this little town, especially if the house were small and white, and stood in one of the back streets. For most of the houses were small, and most of them were painted white, and the back streets ran parallel with each other, and had no names, and were all so much alike that it was very confusing. For instance, if you had asked the way to Mr. So-and-So's, it is very probable that some friend would have directed you as follows: "Go straight forward and take the first turning to your left, and you will find that there are four streets, which run at right angles to the one you are in, and parallel with each other. Each of them has got a big pine in it—one of the old forest trees. Take the last street but one, and the fifth white house you come to is Mr. So-and-So's. He has green blinds and a coloured servant." You would not always have got such clear directions as these, but with them you would probably have found the house at last, partly by accident, partly by the blinds and coloured servant. Some of the neighbours affirmed that the little white house had a name; that all the houses and streets had names, only they were traditional and not recorded anywhere; that very few people knew them, and nobody made any use of them. The name of the little white house was said to be Trafalgar Villa, which seemed so inappropriate to the modest peace-

ful little home, that the man who lived in it tried to find out why it had been so called. He thought that his predecessor must have been in the navy, until he found that he had been the owner of what is called a "dry-goods store," which seems to mean a shop where things are sold which are not good to eat or drink—such as drapery. At last somebody said, that as there was a public house called the "Duke of Wellington" at the corner of the street, there probably had been a nearer one called "The Nelson," which had been burnt down, and that the man who built "The Nelson" had built the house with the spruce fir before it, and that so the name had arisen. An explanation which was just so far probable, that public houses and fires were of frequent occurrence in those parts.

But this has nothing to do with the story. Only we must say, as we said before, and as we should have said had we been living there then, the child we speak of lived in the little white house with one spruce fir just in front of it.

Of all the children who looked forward to the Christmas tree, he looked forward to it the most intensely. He was an imaginative child, of a simple, happy nature, easy to please. His father was an Englishman, and in the long winter evenings he would tell the child tales of the old country, to which his mother would listen, also. Perhaps the parents enjoyed these stories the most. To the boy they were new, and consequently delightful, but to the parents they were old; and as regards some stories, that is better still.

"WHAT KIND OF A BIRD IS THIS ON MY LETTER?"

"What kind of a bird is this on my letter?" asked the boy on the day which brought the Governor's lady's note of invitation. "And oh! what is a Christmas tree?"

"The bird is an English robin," said his father. "It is quite another bird to that which is called a robin here: it is smaller and rounder, and has a redder breast and bright dark eyes, and lives and sings at home through the winter. A Christmas tree is a fir tree—just such a one as that outside the door—brought into the house and covered with lights and presents. Picture to yourself our fir tree lighted up with tapers on all the branches, with dolls, and trumpets, and bonbons, and drums, and toys of all kinds hanging from it like fir cones, and on the tip-top shoot a figure of a Christmas Angel in white, with a star upon its head."

"Fancy!" said the boy.

And fancy he did. Every day he looked at the spruce fir, and tried to imagine it laden with presents, and brilliant with tapers, and thought how wonderful must be that "old country"—*Home,* as it was called, even by those who had never seen it—where the robins were so very red, and where at Christmas the fir trees were hung with toys instead of cones.

It was certainly a pity that, two days before the party, an original idea on the subject of snowmen struck one of the children who used to play together, with their sleds and snow-shoes, in the back streets. The idea was this: That instead of having a commonplace snowman, whose legs

were obliged to be mere stumps, for fear he should be top-heavy, and who could not walk, even with them; who, in fact, could do nothing but stand at the corner of the street, holding his impotent stick, and staring with his pebble eyes, till he was broken to pieces or ignominiously carried away by a thaw—that, instead of this, they should have a real, live snowman, who should walk on competent legs, to the astonishment, and (happy thought!) perhaps to the alarm of the passers-by. This delightful novelty was to be accomplished by covering one of the boys of the party with snow till he looked as like a real snowman as circumstances would admit. At first everybody wanted to be the snowman, but, when it came to the point, it was found to be so much duller to stand still and be covered up than to run about and work, that no one was willing to act the part. At last it was undertaken by the little boy from the Fir House. He was somewhat small, but then he was so good-natured he would always do as he was asked. So he stood manfully still, with his arms folded over a walking stick upon his breast, while the others heaped the snow upon him. The plan was not so successful as they had hoped. The snow would not stick anywhere except on his shoulders, and when it got into his neck, he cried with the cold; but they were so anxious to carry out their project, that they begged him to bear it "just a little longer"; and the urchin who had devised the original idea wiped the child's eyes with his handkerchief, and (with that hopefulness which is so easy over other

HE STOOD MANFULLY STILL.

people's matters) "dared say that when all the snow was on, he wouldn't feel it." However, he did feel it, and that so severely that the children were obliged to give up the game, and taking the stick out of his stiff little arms, to lead him home.

It appears that it is with snowmen as with some other men in conspicuous positions. It is easier to find fault with them than to fill their place.

The end of this was a feverish cold, and, when the day of the party came, the ex-snowman was still in bed. It is due to the other children to say that they felt the disappointment as keenly as he did, and that it greatly damped the pleasure of the party for them to think that they had prevented his sharing in the treat. The most penitent of all was the deviser of the original idea. He had generously offered to stay at home with the little patient, which was as generously refused; but the next evening he was allowed to come and sit on the bed, and describe it all for the amusement of his friend. He was a quaint boy, this urchin, with a face as broad as an American Indian's, eyes as bright as a squirrel's, and all the mischief in life lurking about him, till you could see roguishness in the very folds of his hooded Indian winter coat of blue and scarlet. In his hand he brought the sick child's present: a dray with two white horses, and little barrels that took off and on, and a driver, with wooden joints, a cloth coat, and everything, in fact, that was suitable to the driver of a brewer's dray, except that he had blue boots and earrings, and that his

hair was painted in braids like a lady's, which is clearly the fault of the doll manufacturers, who will persist in making them all of the weaker sex.

"And what was the Christmas tree like?" asked the invalid.

"Exactly like the fir outside your door," was the reply. "Just about that size, and planted in a pot covered with red cloth. It was kept in another room till after tea, and then when the door was opened it was like a street fire in the town at night—such a blaze of light—candles everywhere! And on all the branches the most beautiful presents. I got a drum and a penwiper."

"Was there an angel?" the child asked.

"Oh, yes!" the boy answered. "It was on the tip-top branch, and it was given to me, and I brought it for you, if you would like it; for, you know, I am so very, very sorry I thought of a snowman, and made you ill, and I do love you, and beg you to forgive me."

And the roguish face stooped over the pillow to be kissed; and out of a pocket in the hooded coat came forth the Christmas Angel. In the face it bore a strong family likeness to the drayman, but its feet were hidden in folds of snowy muslin, and on its head glittered a tinsel star.

"How lovely!" said the child. "Father told me about this. I like it best of all. And it is very kind of you, for it is not your fault that I caught cold. I should have liked it if we could have done it, but I think to enjoy being a snowman, one should be snow all through."

They had tea together, and then the invalid was tucked up for the night. The dray was put away in the cupboard, but he took the angel to bed with him.

And so ended the first of the Three Christmas Trees.

* * * * * * * * *

Except for a warm glow from the wood fire in the stove, the room was dark; but about midnight it seemed to the child that a sudden blaze of light filled the chamber. At the same moment the window curtains were drawn aside, and he saw that the spruce fir had come close up to the panes and was peeping in. Ah! how beautiful it looked! It had become a Christmas tree. Lighted tapers shone from every familiar branch, toys of the most fascinating appearance hung like fruit, and on the tip-top shoot there stood the Christmas Angel. He tried to count the candles, but somehow it was impossible. When he looked at them they seemed to change places—to move—to become like the angel, and then to be candles again, while the flames nodded to each other and repeated the blue greeting of the robin, "A Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year!" Then he tried to distinguish the presents, but, beautiful as the toys looked, he could not exactly discover what any of them were, or choose which he would like best. Only the Angel he could see clearly—so clearly! It was more beautiful than the doll under his pillow; it had a lovely face like his own mother's, he thought, and on its head gleamed a star far brighter than tinsel. Its white

robes waved with the flames of the tapers, and it stretched its arms towards him with a smile.

"I am to go and choose my present," thought the child; and he called "Mother! Mother dear! please open the window."

But his mother did not answer. So he thought he must get up himself, and with an effort, he struggled out of bed.

But when he was on his feet, everything seemed changed! Only the firelight shone upon the walls, and the curtains were once more firmly closed before the window. It had been a dream, but so vivid that in his feverish state he still thought it must be true, and dragged the curtains back to let in the glorious sight again. The firelight shone upon a thick coating of frost upon the panes, but no further could he see, so with all his strength he pushed the window open and leaned out into the night.

The spruce fir stood in its old place; but it looked very beautiful in its Christmas dress. Beneath it lay a carpet of pure white. The snow was clustered in exquisite shapes upon its plumy branches; wrapping the treetop with its little cross shoots, as a white robe might wrap a figure with outstretched arms.

There were no tapers to be seen, but northern lights shot up into the dark blue sky, and just over the fir tree shone a bright, bright star.

"Jupiter looks well tonight," said the old Professor in the town observatory, as he fixed his telescope; but to the child it seemed as the star of the Christmas Angel.

His mother had really heard him call, and now came

and put him back to bed again. And so ended the second of the Three Christmas Trees.

* * * * * * * * *

It was enough to have killed him, all his friends said; but it did not. He lived to be a man, and—what is rarer—to keep the faith, the simplicity, the tender-heartedness, the vivid fancy of his childhood. He lived to see many Christmas trees "at home," in that old country where the robins are redbreasts, and sing in winter. There a heart as good and gentle as his own became one with his; and once he brought his young wife across the sea to visit the place where he was born. They stood near the little white house, and he told her the story of the Christmas trees.

"This was when I was a child," he added.

"But that you are still," said she; and she plucked a bit of the fir tree and kissed it, and carried it away.

He lived to tell the story to his children, and even to his grandchildren; but he never was able to decide which of the two was the more beautiful—the Christmas Tree of his dream, or the Spruce Fir as it stood in the loveliness of that winter night.

This is told, not that it has anything to do with any of the Three Christmas Trees, but to show that the story is a happy one, as is right and proper; that the hero lived, and married, and had children, and was as prosperous as good people, in books, should always be.

Of course he died at last. The best and happiest of

men must die; and it is only because some stories stop short in their history, that every hero is not duly buried before we lay down the book.

When death came for our hero he was an old man. The beloved wife, some of his children, and many of his friends had died before him, and of those whom he had loved there were fewer to leave than to rejoin. He had had a short illness, with little pain, and was now lying on his deathbed in one of the big towns in the North of England. His youngest son, a clergyman, was with him, and one or two others of his children, and by the fire sat the doctor.

The doctor had been sitting by the patient, but now that he could do no more for him he had moved to the fire; and they had taken the ghastly, half-emptied medicine bottles from the table by the bedside, and had spread it with a fair linen cloth, and had set out the silver vessels of the Supper of the Lord.

The old man had been "wandering" somewhat during the day. He had talked much of going home to the old country, and with the wide range of dying thoughts he had seemed to mingle memories of childhood with his hopes of Paradise. At intervals he was clear and collected—one of those moments had been chosen for his last sacrament—and he had fallen asleep with the blessing in his ears.

He slept so long and so peacefully that the son almost began to hope that there might be a change, and looked towards the doctor, who still sat by the fire with his right leg crossed over his left. The doctor's eyes were also on

the bed, but at that moment he drew out his watch and looked at it with an air of professional conviction, which said, "It's only a question of time." Then he crossed his left leg over his right, and turned to the fire again. Before the right leg should be tired, all would be over. The son saw it as clearly as if it had been spoken, and he too turned away and sighed.

As they sat, the bells of a church in the town began to chime for midnight service, for it was Christmas Eve, but they did not wake the dying man. He slept on and on.

The doctor dozed. The son read in the Prayer Book on the table, and one of his sisters read with him. Another, from grief and weariness, slept with her head upon his shoulder. Except for a warm glow from the fire, the room was dark. Suddenly the old man sat up in bed, and, in a strong voice, cried with inexpressible enthusiasm:

"How beautiful!"

The son held back his sisters, and asked quietly.

"*What,* my dear Father?"

"The Christmas Tree!" he said in a low, eager voice. "Draw back the curtains."

They were drawn back; but nothing could be seen, and still the old man gazed as if in ecstasy.

"Light!" he murmured. "The Angel! the Star!"

Again there was silence; and then he stretched forth his hands, and cried passionately,

"The Angel is beckoning to me! Mother! Mother dear! Please open the window."

The sash was thrown open, and all eyes turned involuntarily where those of the dying man were gazing. There was no Christmas tree—no tree at all. But over the housetops the morning star looked pure and pale in the dawn of Christmas Day. For the night was past, and above the distant hum of the streets the clear voices of some waits made the words of an old carol heard—words dearer for their association than their poetry—

> "While shepherds watched their flocks by night,
> All seated on the ground,
> The Angel of the Lord came down,
> And glory shone around."

When the window was opened, the soul passed; and when they looked back to the bed the old man had lain down again, and like a child, was smiling in his sleep—his last sleep.

And this was the Third Christmas Tree.

CHRISTMAS CRACKERS

CHRISTMAS CRACKERS

A FANTASIA

IT was Christmas Eve in an old-fashioned country-house, where Christmas was being kept with old-fashioned form and custom. It was getting late. The candles swaggered in their sockets, and the yule log glowed steadily like a red-hot coal.

"The fire has reached his heart," said the tutor: "he is warm all through. How red he is! He shines with heat and hospitality like some warm-hearted old gentleman when a convivial evening is pretty far advanced. Tomorrow he will be as cold and grey as the morning after a festival, when the glasses are being washed up, and the host is calculating his expenses. Yes! you know it is so;" and the tutor nodded to the yule log as he spoke; and the log flared and crackled in return, till the tutor's face shone like his own. He had no other means of reply.

The tutor was grotesque-looking at any time. He was lank and meagre, with a long body and limbs, and high

shoulders. His face was smooth-shaven, and his skin like old parchment stretched over high cheek-bones and lantern jaws; but in their hollow sockets his eyes gleamed with the changeful lustre of two precious gems. In the ruddy firelight they were like rubies, and when he drew back into the shade they glared green like the eyes of a cat. It must not be inferred from the tutor's presence this evening that there were no Christmas holidays in this house. They had begun some days before; and if the tutor had had a home to go to, it is to be presumed that he would have gone.

As the candles got lower, and the log flared less often, weird lights and shades, such as haunt the twilight, crept about the room. The tutor's shadow, longer, lanker, and more grotesque than himself, mopped and mowed upon the wall beside him. The snap-dragon burnt blue, and as the raisin hunters stirred the flaming spirit, the ghastly light made the tutor look so hideous that the widow's little boy was on the eve of howling, and spilled the raisins he had just secured. (He did not like putting his fingers into the flames, but he hovered near the more adventurous schoolboys and collected the raisins that were scattered on the table by the hasty *grabs* of braver hands.)

The widow was a relative of the house. She had married a Mr. Jones, and having been during his life his devoted slave, had on his death transferred her allegiance to his son. The late Mr. Jones was a small man with a strong temper, a large appetite, and a taste for drawing-room theatricals. So Mrs. Jones had called her son Macready;

"for," she said, "his poor papa would have made a fortune on the stage, and I wish to commemorate his talents. Besides, Macready sounds better with Jones than a commoner Christian name would do."

But his cousins called him MacGreedy.

"The apples of the enchanted garden were guarded by dragons. Many knights went after them. One wished for the apples, but he did not like to fight the dragons."

It was the tutor who spoke from the dark corner by the fireplace. His eyes shone like a cat's, and MacGreedy felt like a half-scared mouse, and made up his mind to cry. He put his right fist into one eye, and had just taken it out, and was about to put his left fist into the other, when he saw that the tutor was no longer looking at him. So he made up his mind to go on with the raisins, for one can have a peevish cry at any time, but plums are not scattered broadcast every day. Several times he had tried to pocket them, but just at the moment the tutor was sure to look at him, and in his fright he dropped the raisins, and never could find them again. So this time he resolved to eat them then and there. He had just put one into his mouth when the tutor leaned forward, and his eyes, glowing in the firelight, met MacGreedy's, who had not even the presence of mind to shut his mouth but remained spellbound, with a raisin in his cheek.

Flicker, flack! The schoolboys stirred up the snapdragon again, and with the blue light upon his features the tutor made so horrible a grimace that MacGreedy swal-

lowed the raisin with a start. He had bolted it whole, and it might have been a bread pill for any enjoyment he had of the flavour. But the tutor laughed aloud. He certainly was an alarming object, pulling those grimaces in the blue brandy glare; and unpleasantly like a picture of Bogy himself with horns and a tail, in a juvenile volume upstairs. True, there were no horns to speak of among the tutor's grizzled curls, and his coat seemed to fit as well as most people's on his long back, so that unless he put his tail in his pocket, it is difficult to see how he could have had one. But then (as Miss Letitia said) "With dress one can do anything and hide anything." And on dress Miss Letitia's opinion was final.

Miss Letitia was a cousin. She was dark, high-coloured, glossy-haired, stout, and showy. She was as neat as a new pin, and had a will of her own. Her hair was firmly fixed by bandoline, her garibaldis by an arrangement which failed when applied to those of the widow, and her opinions by the simple process of looking at everything from one point of view. Her *forte* was dress and general ornamentation; not that Miss Letitia was extravagant—far from it. If one may use the expression, she utilized for ornament a hundred bits and scraps that most people would have wasted. But, like other artists, she saw everything through the medium of her own art. She looked at birds with an eye to hats, and at flowers with reference to evening parties. At picture exhibitions and concerts she carried away jacket patterns and bonnets in her head, as other

people make mental notes of an aerial effect, or a bit of fine instrumentation. An enthusiastic horticulturist once sent Miss Letitia a cut specimen of a new flower. It was a lovely spray from a lately imported shrub. A botanist would have pressed it—an artist must have taken its portrait—a poet might have written a sonnet in praise of its beauty. Miss Letitia twisted a piece of wire round its stem, and fastened it on to her black lace bonnet. It came on the day of a review, when Miss Letitia had to appear in a carriage, and it was quite a success. As she said to the widow, "It was so natural that no one could doubt its being Parisian."

"What a strange fellow that tutor is!" said the visitor. He spoke to the daughter of the house, a girl with a face like a summer's day, and hair like a ripe corn-field rippling in the sun. He was a fine young man, and had a youth's taste for the sports and amusements of his age. But lately he had changed. He seemed to himself to be living in a higher, nobler atmosphere than hitherto. He had discovered that he was poetical—he might prove to be a genius. He certainly was eloquent, he could talk for hours, and did so—to the young lady with the sunshiny face. They spoke on the highest subjects, and what a listener she was! So intelligent and appreciative, and with such an exquisite *pose* of the head—it must inspire a block of wood merely to see such a creature in a listening attitude. As to our young friend, he poured forth volumes; he was really clever, and for her he became eloquent.

Tonight he spoke of Christmas, of time-honoured custom and old association; and what he said would have made a Christmas article for a magazine of the first class. He poured scorn on the cold nature that could not, and the affectation that would not, appreciate the domestic festivities of this sacred season. What, he asked, could be more delightful, more perfect than such a gathering as this, of the family circle round the Christmas hearth? He spoke with feeling, and it may be said with disinterested feeling, for he had not joined his family circle himself this Christmas, and there was a vacant place by the hearth of his own home.

"He is strange," said the young lady (she spoke of the tutor in answer to the above remark); "but I am very fond of him. He has been with us so long he is like one of the family; though we know as little of his history, as we did on the day he came."

"He looks clever," said the visitor. (Perhaps that is the least one can say for a fellow creature who shows a great deal of bare skull, and is not otherwise good-looking.)

"He is clever," she answered, "wonderfully clever; so clever and so odd that sometimes I fancy he is hardly 'canny.' There is something almost supernatural about his acuteness and his ingenuity, but they are so kindly used; I wonder he has not brought out any playthings for us tonight."

"Playthings?" inquired the young man.

"Yes; on birthdays or festivals like this he generally brings something out of those huge pockets of his. He has

been all over the world, and he produces Indian puzzles, Japanese flower buds that bloom in hot water, and German toys with complicated machinery, which I suspect him of manufacturing himself. I call him Godpapa Grosselmayer, after that delightful old fellow in Hoffmann's tale of the Nut Cracker."

"What's that about crackers?" inquired the tutor, sharply, his eyes changing colour like a fire opal.

"I am talking of *Nussnacker und Mausekönig,*" laughed the young lady. "Crackers do not belong to Christmas; fireworks come on the 5th of November."

"Tut, tut!" said the tutor; "I always tell your ladyship that you are still a tomboy at heart, as when I first came, and you climbed trees and pelted myself and my young students with horse chestnuts. You think of crackers to explode at the heels of timorous old gentlemen in a November fog; but I mean bonbon crackers, coloured crackers, dainty crackers—crackers for young people with mottoes of sentiment"—(here the tutor shrugged his high shoulders an inch or two higher, and turned the palms of his hands outwards with a glance indescribably comical)— "crackers with paper prodigies, crackers with sweetmeats—*such* sweetmeats!" He smacked his lips with a grotesque contortion, and looked at Master MacGreedy, who choked himself with his last raisin, and forthwith burst into tears.

The widow tried in vain to soothe him with caresses, he only stamped and howled the more. But Miss Letitia gave him some smart smacks on the shoulders to cure his

choking fit, and as she kept up the treatment with vigour, the young gentleman was obliged to stop and assure her that the raisin had "gone the right way" at last. "If he were my child," Miss Letitia had been known to observe, with that confidence which characterizes the theories of those who are not parents, "I would, etc., etc., etc."; in fact, Miss Letitia thought she would have made a very different boy of him—as, indeed, I believe she would.

"Are crackers all that you have for us, sir?" asked one of the two schoolboys, as they hung over the tutor's chair. They were twins, grand boys, with broad, good-humoured faces, and curly wigs, as like as two puppy dogs of the same breed. They were only known apart by their intimate friends, and were always together, romping, laughing, snarling, squabbling, huffing and helping each other against the world. Each of them owned a wiry terrier, and in their relations to each other the two dogs (who were marvellously alike) closely followed the example of their masters.

"Do you not care for crackers, Jim?" asked the tutor.

"Not much, sir. They do for girls: but, as you know, I care for nothing but military matters. Do you remember that beautiful toy of yours—'The Besieged City'? Ah! I liked that. Look out, Tom! you're shoving my arm. Can't you stand straight, man?"

"R-r-r-r—r-r, snap!"

Tom's dog was resenting contact with Jim's dog on the hearthrug. There was a hustle among the four, and then they subsided.

"The Besieged City was all very well for you, Jim," said Tom, who meant to be a sailor; "but please to remember that it admitted of no attack from the sea; and what was there for me to do? Ah, sir! you are so clever, I often think you could help me to make a swing with ladders instead of single ropes, so that I could run up and down the rigging whilst it was in full go."

"That would be something like your fir-tree prank, Tom," said his sister. "Can you believe," she added, turning to the visitor, "that Tom lopped the branches of a tall young fir tree all the way up, leaving little bits for foothold, and then climbed up it one day in an awful storm of wind, and clung on at the top, rocking backwards and forwards? And when Papa sent word for him to come down, he said parental authority was superseded at sea by the rules of the service. It was a dreadful storm, and the tree snapped very soon after he got safe to the ground."

"Storm!" sneered Tom, "a capful of wind. Well, it did blow half a gale at the last. But oh! it was glorious!"

"Let us see what we can make of the crackers," said the tutor—and he pulled some out of his pocket. They were put in a dish upon the table, for the company to choose from; and the terriers jumped and snapped, and tumbled over each other, for they thought that the plate contained eatables. Animated by the same idea, but with quieter steps, Master MacGreedy also approached the table.

"The dogs are noisy," said the tutor, "too noisy. We must have quiet—peace and quiet." His lean hand was

once more in his pocket, and he pulled out a box, from which he took some powder, which he scattered on the burning log. A slight smoke now rose from the hot embers, and floated into the room. Was the powder one of those strange compounds that act upon the brain? Was it a magician's powder? Who knows? With it came a sweet, subtle fragrance. It was strange—every one fancied he had smelt it before, and all were absorbed in wondering what it was, and where they had met with it. Even the dogs sat on their haunches with their noses up, sniffing in a speculative manner.

"It's not lavender," said the grandmother, slowly, "and it's not rosemary. There is a something of tansy in it (and a very fine tonic flavour too, my dears, though it's *not* in fashion now). Depend upon it, it's a potpourri, and from an excellent receipt, sir"—and the old lady bowed courteously towards the tutor. "My mother made the best potpourri in the country, and it was very much like this. Not quite, perhaps, but much the same, much the same."

The grandmother was a fine old gentlewoman "of the old school," as the phrase is. She was very stately and gracious in her manners, daintily neat in her person, and much attached to the old parson of the parish, who now sat near her chair. All her life she had been very proud of her fine stock of fair linen, both household and personal; and for many years past had kept her own grave clothes ready in a drawer. They were bleached as white as snow, and lay among bags of dried lavender and potpourri. Many times

had it seemed likely that they would be needed, for the old lady had had severe illnesses of late, when the good parson sat by her bedside, and read to her of the coming of the Bridegroom, and of that "fine linen clean and white," which is "the righteousness of the saints." It was of that drawer, with its lavender and potpourri bags, that the scented smoke had reminded her.

"It has rather an overpowering odour," said the old parson; "it is suggestive of incense. I am sure I once smelt something like it in the Church of the Nativity at Bethlehem. It is very delicious."

The parson's long residence in his parish had been marked by one great holiday. With the savings of many years he had performed a pilgrimage to the Holy Land; and it was rather a joke against him that he illustrated a large variety of subjects by reference to his favourite topic, the holiday of his life.

"It smells of gunpowder," said Jim, decidedly, "and something else. I can't tell what."

"Something one smells in a seaport town," said Tom.

"Can't be very delicious then," Jim retorted.

"It's not *quite* the same," piped the widow; "but it reminds me very much of an old bottle of attar of roses that was given to me when I was at school, with a copy of verses, by a young gentleman who was brother to one of the pupils. I remember Mr. Jones was quite annoyed when he found it in an old box, where I am sure I had not touched it for ten years or more; and I never spoke to him but once, on Ex-

amination Day (the young gentleman, I mean). And it's like—yes, it's certainly like a hair-wash Mr. Jones used to use. I've forgotten what it was called, but I know it cost fifteen shillings a bottle; and Macready threw one over a few weeks before his dear papa's death, and annoyed him extremely."

While the company were thus engaged, Master MacGreedy took advantage of the general abstraction to secure half a dozen crackers to his own share; he retired to a corner with them, where he meant to pick them quietly to pieces by himself. He wanted the gay paper, and the motto, and the sweetmeats; but he did not like the report of the cracker. And then what he did want, he wanted all to himself.

"Give us a cracker," said Master Jim, dreamily.

The dogs, after a few dissatisfied snorts, had dropped from their sitting posture, and were lying close together on the rug, dreaming and uttering short commenting barks and whines at intervals. The twins were now reposing lazily at the tutor's feet, and did not feel disposed to exert themselves even so far as to fetch their own bonbons.

"There's one," said the tutor, taking a fresh cracker from his pocket. One end of it was of red and gold paper, the other of transparent green stuff with silver lines. The boys pulled it.

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The report was louder than Jim had expected.

THE REPORT WAS LOUDER THAN JIM HAD EXPECTED.

"The firing has begun," he murmured, involuntarily; "steady, steady!" these last words were to his horse, who seemed to be moving under him, not from fear, but from impatience. What had been the red and gold paper of the cracker was now the scarlet and gold lace of his own cavalry uniform. He knocked a speck from his sleeve, and scanned the distant ridge, from which a thin line of smoke floated solemnly away, with keen, impatient eyes. Were they to stand inactive all the day?

Presently the horse erects his head. His eyes sparkle—he pricks his sensitive ears—his nostrils quiver with a strange delight. It is the trumpet! Fan farrâ! Fan farrâ! The brazen voice speaks—the horses move—the plumes wave—the helmets shine. On a summer's day they ride slowly, gracefully, calmly down a slope, to Death or Glory. Fan farrâ! Fan farrâ! Fan farrâ!

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Of all this Master Tom knew nothing. The report of the cracker seemed to him only an echo in his brain of a sound that had been in his ears for thirty-six weary hours. The noise of a heavy sea beating against the ship's side in a gale. It was over now, and he was keeping the midnight watch on deck, gazing upon the liquid green of the waves, which, heaving and seething after storm, were lit with phosphoric light, and as the ship held steadily on her course, poured past at the rate of twelve knots an hour in a silvery stream. Faster than any ship can sail his thoughts trav-

elled home; and as old times came back to him, he hardly knew whether what he looked at was the phosphor-lighted sea, or green gelatine paper barred with silver. And did the tutor speak? Or was it the voice of some sea monster sounding in his ears?

"The spirits of the storm have gone below to make their report. The treasure gained from sunk vessels has been reckoned, and the sea is illuminated in honour of the spoil."

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The visitor now took a cracker and held it to the young lady. Her end was of white paper with a raised pattern; his of dark-blue gelatine with gold stars. It snapped, the bonbon dropped between them, and the young man got the motto. It was a very bald one—

"My heart is thine.
Wilt thou be mine?"

He was ashamed to show it to her. What could be more meagre? One could write a hundred better couplets "standing on one leg," as the saying is. He was trying to improvise just one for the occasion, when he became aware that the blue sky over his head was dark with the shades of night, and lighted with stars. A brook rippled near with a soothing monotony. The evening wind sighed through the trees, and wafted the fragrance of the sweet bay-leaved willow towards him, and blew a stray lock of hair against his face. Yes! *She* also was there, walking beside him, under the scented willow bushes. Where, why, and

TOM WAS KEEPING THE MIDNIGHT WATCH ON DECK.

whither he did not ask to know. She was with him—with him; and he seemed to tread on the summer air. He had no doubt as to the nature of his own feelings for her, and here was such an opportunity for declaring them as might never occur again. Surely now, if ever, he would be eloquent! Thoughts of poetry clothed in words of fire must spring unbidden to his lips at such a moment. And yet somehow he could not find a single word to say. He beat his brains, but not an idea would come forth. Only that idiotic cracker motto, which haunted him with its meagre couplet.

"My heart is thine.
Wilt thou be mine?"

Meanwhile they wandered on. The precious time was passing. He must at least make a beginning.

"What a fine night it is!" he observed. But, oh dear! That was a thousand times balder and more meagre than the cracker motto; and not another word could he find to say. At this moment the awkward silence was broken by a voice from a neighbouring copse. It was a nightingale singing to his mate. There was no lack of eloquence, and of melodious eloquence, there. The song was as plaintive as old memories, and as full of tenderness as the eyes of the young girl were full of tears. They were standing still now, and with her graceful head bent she was listening to the bird. He stooped his head near hers, and spoke with a simple natural outburst almost involuntary.

"Do you ever think of old times? Do you remember

the old house, and the fun we used to have? and the tutor whom you pelted with horse chestnuts when you were a little girl? And those cracker bonbons, and the motto *we* drew—

'My heart is thine.
Wilt thou be mine?' "

She smiled, and lifted her eyes ("blue as the sky, and bright as the stars," he thought) to his, and answered "Yes."

Then the bonbon motto was avenged, and there was silence. Eloquent, perfect, complete, beautiful silence! Only the wind sighed through the fragrant willows, the stream rippled, the stars shone, and in the neighbouring copse the nightingale sang, and sang, and sang.

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When the white end of the cracker came into the young lady's hand, she was full of admiration for the fine raised pattern. As she held it between her fingers it suddenly struck her that she had discovered what the tutor's fragrant smoke smelt like. It was like the scent of orange flowers, and had certainly a soporific effect upon the senses. She felt very sleepy, and as she stroked the shiny surface of the cracker she found herself thinking it was very soft for paper, and then rousing herself with a start, and wondering at her own folly in speaking thus of the white silk in which she was dressed, and of which she was holding up the skirt between her finger and thumb, as if she were dancing a minuet.

IT WAS A NIGHTINGALE SINGING TO HIS MATE.

"It's Grandmamma's egg-shell brocade!" she cried. "Oh, Grandmamma! Have you given it to me? That lovely old thing! But I thought it was the family wedding dress, and that I was not to have it till I was a bride."

"And so you are, my dear. And a fairer bride the sun never shone on," sobbed the old lady, who was kissing and blessing her, and wishing her, in the words of the old formula—

"Health to wear it,
Strength to tear it,
And money to buy another."

"There is no hope for the last two things, you know," said the young girl; "for I am sure that the flag that braved a thousand years was not half so strong as your brocade; and as to buying another, there are none to be bought in these degenerate days."

The old lady's reply was probably very gracious, for she liked to be complimented on the virtues of old things in general, and of her egg-shell brocade in particular. But of what she said her granddaughter heard nothing. With the strange irregularity of dreams, she found herself, she knew not how, in the old church. It was true. She was a bride, standing there with old friends and old associations thick around her, on the threshold of a new life. The sun shone through the stained glass of the windows, and illuminated the brocade, whose old-fashioned stiffness so became her childish beauty, and flung a thousand new tints over her sunny hair, and drew so powerful a fragrance from the

orange blossom with which it was twined, that it was almost overpowering. Yes! It was too sweet—too strong. She certainly would not be able to bear it much longer without losing her senses. And the service was going on. A question had been asked of her, and she must reply. She made a strong effort, and said, "Yes," simply and very earnestly, for it was what she meant. But she had no sooner said it than she became uneasily conscious that she had not used the right words. Some one laughed. It was the tutor, and his voice jarred and disturbed the dream, as a stone troubles the surface of still water. The vision trembled, and then broke, and the young lady found herself still sitting by the table and fingering the cracker paper, while the tutor chuckled and rubbed his hands by the fire, and his shadow scrambled on the wall like an ape upon a tree. But her "Yes" had passed into the young man's dream without disturbing it, and he dreamt on.

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It was a cracker like the preceding one that the grandmother and the parson pulled together. The old lady had insisted upon it. The good rector had shown a tendency to low spirits this evening, and a wish to withdraw early. But the old lady did not approve of people "shirking" (as boys say) either their duties or their pleasures; and to keep a "merry Christmas" in a family circle that had been spared to meet in health and happiness, seemed to her to be both the one and the other.

It was his sermon for next day which weighed on the parson's mind. Not that he was behindhand with that part of his duties. He was far too methodical in his habits for that, and it had been written before the bustle of Christmas week began. But after preaching Christmas sermons from the same pulpit for thirty-five years, he felt keenly how difficult it is to awaken due interest in subjects that are so familiar, and to give new force to lessons so often repeated. So he wanted a quiet hour in his own study before he went to rest, with the sermon that did not satisfy him, and the subject that should be so heart-stirring and ever new—the Story of Bethlehem.

He consented, however, to pull one cracker with the grandmother, though he feared the noise might startle her nerves, and said so.

"Nerves were not invented in my young days," said the old lady, firmly; and she took her part in the ensuing explosion without so much as a wink.

As the crackers snapped, it seemed to the parson as if the fragrant smoke from the yule log were growing denser in the room. Through the mist from time to time the face of the tutor loomed large, and then disappeared. At last the clouds rolled away, and the parson breathed clear air. Clear, yes, and how clear. This brilliant freshness, these intense lights and shadows, this mildness and purity in the night air——

"It is not England," he muttered, "it is the East. I have felt no air like this since I breathed the air of Palestine."

Over his head, through immeasurable distances, the dark-blue space was lighted by the great multitude of the stars, whose glittering ranks have in that atmosphere a distinctness and a glory unseen with us. Perhaps no scene of beauty in the visible creation has proved a more hackneyed theme for the poet and the philosopher than a starry night. But not all the superabundance of simile and moral illustration with which the subject has been loaded can rob the beholder of the freshness of its grandeur or the force of its teaching; that noblest and most majestic vision of the handiwork of God on which the eye of man is here permitted to rest.

As the parson gazed he became conscious that he was not alone. Other eyes besides his were watching the skies tonight. Dark, profound, patient, eastern eyes, used from the cradle to the grave to watch and wait. The eyes of star-gazers and dream-interpreters; men who believed the fate of empires to be written in shining characters on the face of heaven, as the "Mene, Mene," was written in fire on the walls of the Babylonian palace. The old parson was one of the many men of real learning and wide reading who pursue their studies in the quiet country parishes of England, and it was with the keen interest of intelligence that he watched the group of figures that lay near him.

"Is this a vision of the past?" he asked himself. "There can be no doubt as to these men. They are star-gazers, magi, and, from their dress and bearing, men of high rank; perhaps 'teachers of a higher wisdom' in one of the purest

philosophies of the old heathen world. When one thinks," he pursued, "of the intense interest, the eager excitement which the student of history finds in the narrative of the past as unfolded in dusty records written by the hand of man, one may realize how absorbing must have been that science which professed to unveil the future, and to display to the eyes of the wise the fate of dynasties written with the finger of God amid the stars."

The dark-robed figures were so still that they might almost have been carved in stone. The air seemed to grow purer and purer; the stars shone brighter and brighter: suspended in ether the planets seemed to hang like lamps. Now a shooting meteor passed athwart the sky, and vanished behind the hill. But not for this did the watchers move; in silence they watched on—till, on a sudden, how and whence the parson knew not, across the shining ranks of that immeasurable host, whose names and number are known to God alone, there passed in slow but obvious motion one brilliant solitary star—a star of such surpassing brightness that he involuntarily joined in the wild cry of joy and greeting with which the Men of the East now prostrated themselves with their faces to the earth.

He could not understand the language in which, with noisy clamour and gesticulation, they broke their former profound and patient silence, and greeted the portent for which they had watched. But he knew now that these were the Wise Men of the Epiphany, and that this was the Star of Bethlehem. In his ears rang the energetic sim-

plicity of the Gospel narrative, "When they saw the Star, they rejoiced with exceeding great joy."

With exceeding great joy! Ah! happy magi, who (more blest than Balaam the son of Beor), were faithful to the dim light vouchsafed to you; the Gentile church may well be proud of your memory. Ye travelled long and far to bring royal offerings to the King of the Jews, with a faith not found in Israel. Ye saw Him whom prophets and kings had desired to see, and were glad. Wise men indeed, and wise with the highest wisdom, in that ye suffered yourselves to be taught of God.

Then the parson prayed that if this were indeed a dream he might dream on; might pass, if only in a vision, over the hill, following the footsteps of the magi, whilst the Star went before them, till he should see it rest above that city, which, little indeed among the thousands of Judah, was yet the birthplace of the Lord's Christ.

"Ah!" he almost sobbed, "let me follow! On my knees let me follow into the house and see the Holy Child. In the eyes of how many babies I have seen mind and thought far beyond their powers of communication, every mother knows. But if at times, with a sort of awe, one sees the immortal soul shining through the prison bars of helpless infancy, what, oh! what must it be to behold the Godhead veiled in flesh through the face of a little child!"

The parson stretched out his arms, but even with the passion of his words the vision began to break. He dared not move for fear it should utterly fade, and as he lay still

and silent, the wise men roused their followers, and led by the Star, the train passed solemnly over the distant hills.

Then the clear night became clouded with fragrant vapour, and with a sigh the parson awoke.

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When the cracker snapped and the white end was left in the grandmother's hand, she was astonished to perceive (as she thought) that the white lace veil which she had worn over her wedding bonnet was still in her possession, and that she was turning it over in her fingers. "I fancied I gave it to Jemima when her first baby was born," she muttered dreamily. It was darned and yellow, but it carried her back all the same, and recalled happy hours with wonderful vividness. She remembered the post-chaise and the postillion. "He was such a pert little fellow, and how we laughed at him! He must be either dead or a very shaky old man by now," said the old lady. She seemed to smell the scent of meadow-sweet that was so powerful in a lane through which they drove; and how clearly she could see the clean little country inn where they spent their honeymoon! She seemed to be there now, taking off her bonnet and shawl, in the quaint clean chamber, with the heavy oak rafters, and the jasmine coming in at the window, and glancing with pardonable pride at the fair face reflected in the mirror. But as she laid her things on the patchwork coverlet, it seemed to her that the lace veil became fine white linen, and was folded about a figure that lay in the

bed; and when she looked round the room again everything was draped in white—white blinds hung before the windows, and even the old oak chest and the press were covered with clean white cloths, after the decent custom of the country; while from the church tower without the passing bell tolled slowly. She had not seen the face of the corpse, and a strange anxiety came over her to count the strokes of the bell, which tell if it is a man, woman, or child who has passed away. One, two, three, four, five, six, seven! No more. It was a woman, and when she looked on the face of the dead she saw her own. But even as she looked the fair linen of the grave clothes became the buoyant drapery of another figure, in whose face she found a strange recognition of the lineaments of the dead with all the loveliness of the bride. But ah! more, much more! On that face there was a beauty not doomed to wither, before those happy eyes lay a future unshadowed by the imperfections of earthly prospects, and the folds of that robe were white as no fuller on earth can white them. The window curtain parted, the jasmine flowers bowed their heads, the spirit passed from the chamber of death, and the old lady's dream was ended.

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Miss Letitia had shared a cracker with the widow. The widow squeaked when the cracker went off, and then insisted upon giving up the smart paper and everything to Miss Letitia. She had always given up everything to Mr.

Jones, she did so now to Master MacGreedy, and was quite unaccustomed to keep anything for her own share. She did not give this explanation herself, but so it was.

The cracker that thus fell into the hands of Miss Letitia was one of those new-fashioned ones that have a paper pattern of some article of dress wrapped up in them instead of a bonbon. This one was a paper bonnet made in the latest *mode*—of green tissue paper; and Miss Letitia stuck it on the top of her chignon with an air that the widow envied from the bottom of her heart. She had not the gift of "carrying off" her clothes. But to the tutor, on the contrary, it seemed to afford the most extreme amusement; and as Miss Letitia bowed gracefully hither and thither in the energy of her conversation with the widow, the green paper fluttering with each emphasis, he fairly shook with delight, his shadow dancing like a maniac beside him. He had scattered some more powder on the coals, and it may have been that the smoke got into her eyes, and confused her ideas of colour, but Miss Letitia was struck with a fervid and otherwise unaccountable admiration for the paper ends of the cracker, which were most unusually ugly. One was of a sallowish salmon-colour, and transparent, the other was of brick-red paper with a fringe. As Miss Letitia turned them over, she saw, to her unspeakable delight, that there were several yards of each material, and her peculiar genius instantly seized upon the fact that in the present rage for double skirts there might be enough of the two kinds to combine into a fashionable dress.

It had never struck her before that a dirty salmon went well with brick red. "They blend so becomingly, my dear," she murmured; "and I think the under skirt will sit well, it is so stiff."

The widow did not reply. The fumes of the tutor's compound made her sleepy, and though she nodded to Miss Letitia's observations, it was less from appreciation of their force, than from inability to hold up her head. She was dreaming uneasy, horrible dreams, like nightmares; in which from time to time there mingled expressions of doubt and dissatisfaction which fell from Miss Letitia's lips. "Just half a yard short—no gores—false hem" (and the melancholy reflection that) "flounces take so much stuff." Then the tutor's face kept appearing and vanishing with horrible grimaces through the mist. At last the widow fell fairly asleep, and dreamed that she was married to the Blue Beard of nursery annals, and that on his return from his memorable journey he had caught her in the act of displaying the mysterious cupboard to Miss Letitia. As he waved his scimitar over her head, he seemed unaccountably to assume the form and features of the tutor. In her agitation the poor woman could think of no plea against his severity, except that the cupboard was already crammed with the corpses of his previous wives, and there was no room for her. She was pleading this argument when Miss Letitia's voice broke in upon her dream with decisive accent:

"There's enough for two bodies."

The widow shrieked and awoke.

"High and low," explained Miss Letitia. "My dear, what *are* you screaming about?"

"I am very sorry indeed," said the widow; "I beg your pardon, I'm sure, a thousand times. But since Mr. Jones's death I have been so nervous, and I had such a horrible dream. And, oh dear! oh dear!" she added, "what is the matter with my precious child? Macready, love, come to your mamma, my pretty lamb."

Ugh! ugh! There were groans from the corner where Master MacGreedy sat on his crackers as if they were eggs, and he hatching them. He had only touched one, as yet, of the stock he had secured. He had picked it to pieces, had avoided the snap, and had found a large comfit like an egg with a rough shell inside. Every one knows that the goodies in crackers are not of a very superior quality. There is a large amount of white lead in the outside, thinly disguised by a shabby flavour of sugar. But that outside once disposed of, there lies an almond at the core. Now an almond is a very delicious thing in itself, and doubly nice when it takes the taste of white paint and chalk out of one's mouth. But in spite of all the white lead and sugar and chalk through which he had sucked his way, MacGreedy could not come to the almond. A dozen times had he been on the point of spitting out the delusive sweetmeat; but just as he thought of it he was sure to feel a bit of hard rough edge, and thinking he had gained the kernel at last, he held valiantly on. It only proved to be a rough bit of sugar, however, and still the interminable coating melted copiously in his mouth; and still the clean, fragrant almond

evaded his hopes. At last with a groan he spat the seemingly undiminished bonbon on to the floor, and turned as white and trembling as an arrowroot blanc-mange.

In obedience to the widow's entreaties the tutor opened a window, and tried to carry MacGreedy to the air; but that young gentleman utterly refused to allow the tutor to approach him, and was borne howling to bed by his mamma.

With the fresh air the fumes of the fragrant smoke dispersed, and the company roused themselves.

"Rather oppressive, eh?" said the master of the house, who had had his dream, too, with which we have no concern.

The dogs had had theirs, also, and had testified to the same in their sleep by low growls and whines. Now they shook themselves, and rubbed against each other, growling in a warlike manner through their teeth, and wagging peaceably with their little stumpy tails.

The twins shook themselves, and fell to squabbling as to whether they had been to sleep or no; and, if either, which of them had given way to that weakness.

Miss Letitia took the paper bonnet from her head with a nervous laugh, and after looking regretfully at the cracker papers, put them in her pocket.

The parson went home through the frosty night. In the village street he heard a boy's voice singing two lines of the Christian hymn:

> "Trace we the Babe Who hath redeemed our loss
> From the poor Manger to the bitter Cross;"

and his eyes filled with tears.

The old lady went to bed and slept in peace.

"In all the thirty-five years we have been privileged to hear you, sir," she told the rector next day after service, "I never heard such a Christmas sermon before."

The visitor carefully preserved the blue paper and the cracker motto. He came down early next morning to find the white half to put with them. He did not find it, for the young lady had taken it the night before.

The tutor had been in the room before him, wandering round the scene of the evening's festivities.

The yule log lay black and cold upon the hearth, and the tutor nodded to it. "I told you how it would be," he said; "but never mind, you have had your day, and a merry one too." In the corner lay the heap of crackers which Master MacGreedy had been too ill to remember when he retired. The tutor pocketed them with a grim smile.

As to the comfit, it was eaten by one of the dogs, who had come down earliest of all. He swallowed it whole, so whether it contained an almond or not, remains a mystery to the present time.

OLD FATHER CHRISTMAS

OLD FATHER CHRISTMAS

CHAPTER I

"CAN you fancy, young people," said Godfather Garbel, winking with his prominent eyes, and moving his feet backwards and forwards in his square shoes, so that you could hear the squeak-leather half a room off—"can you fancy my having been a very little boy, and having a godmother? But I had, and she sent me presents on my birthdays, too. And young people did not get presents when I was a child as they get them now. *Grumph!* We had not half so many toys as you have, but we kept them twice as long. I think we were fonder of them, too, though they were neither so handsome, nor so expensive as these new-fangled affairs you are always breaking about the house. *Grumph!*

"You see, middle-class folk were more saving then. My

mother turned and dyed her dresses, and when she had done with them, the servant was very glad to have them; but, bless me! your mother's maids dress so much finer than their mistress, I do not think they would say 'Thank you' for her best Sunday silk. The bustle's the wrong shape. *Grumph!*

"What's that you are laughing at, little miss? It's *pannier,* is it? Well, well, bustle or pannier, call it what you like; but only donkeys wore panniers in my young days, and many's the ride I've had in them.

"Now as I say, my relations and friends thought twice before they pulled out five shillings in a toy shop, but they didn't forget me, all the same.

"On my eighth birthday my mother gave me a bright blue comforter of her own knitting.

"My little sister gave me a ball. My mother had cut out the divisions from various bits in the rag bag, and my sister had done some of the seaming. It was stuffed with bran, and had a cork inside which had broken from old age, and would no longer fit the pickle jar it belonged to. This made the ball bound when we played 'prisoner's base.'

"My father gave me the broken driving whip that had lost the lash, and an old pair of his gloves, to play coachman with; these I had long wished for, since next to sailing in a ship, in my ideas, came the honour and glory of driving a coach.

"My whole soul, I must tell you, was set upon being a sailor. In those days I had rather put to sea once on Farmer Fodder's duck pond than ride twice atop of his hay

wagon; and between the smell of hay and the softness of it, and the height you are up above other folk, and the danger of tumbling off if you don't look out—for hay is elastic as well as soft—you don't easily beat a ride on a hay wagon for pleasure. But as I say, I'd rather put to sea on the duck pond, though the best craft I could borrow was the pigstye door, and a pole to punt with, and the village boys jeering when I got aground, which was most of the time—besides the duck pond never having a wave on it worth the name, punt as you would, and so shallow you could not have got drowned in it to save your life.

"You're laughing now, little master, are you? But let me tell you that drownin's the death for a sailor, whatever you may think. So I've always maintained, and have given every navigable sea in the known world a chance, though here I am after all, laid up in arm-chairs and feather beds, to wait for bronchitis or some other slow poison. *Grumph!*

"Well, we must all go as we're called, sailors or landsmen, and, as I was saying, if I was never to sail a ship, I would have liked to drive a coach. A mail coach, serving His Majesty (Her Majesty now, God bless her!), carrying the Royal Arms, and bound to go, rough weather and fair. Many's the time I've done it (in play, you understand) with that whip and those gloves. Dear! dear! The pains I took to teach my sister Patty to be a highwayman, and jump out on me from the drying ground hedge in the dusk with a 'Stand and deliver!' which she couldn't get out of her throat

for fright, and wouldn't jump hard enough for fear of hurting me.

"The whip and the gloves gave me joy, I can tell you; but there was more to come.

"Kitty the servant gave me a shell that she had had by her for years. How I had coveted that shell! It had this remarkable property: when you put it to your ear you could hear the roaring of the sea. I had never seen the sea, but Kitty was born in a fisherman's cottage, and many an hour have I sat by the kitchen fire whilst she told me strange stories of the mighty ocean, and ever and anon she would snatch the shell from the mantelpiece and clap it to my ear, crying, 'There, child, you couldn't hear it plainer than that. It's the very moral!'

"When Kitty gave me that shell for my very own I felt that life had little more to offer. I held it to every ear in the house, including the cat's; and, seeing Dick the sexton's son go by with an armful of straw to stuff Guy Fawkes, I ran out, and in my anxiety to make him share the treat, and learn what the sea is like, I clapped the shell to his ear so smartly and unexpectedly, that he, thinking me to have struck him, knocked me down then and there with his bundle of straw. When he understood the rights of the case, he begged my pardon handsomely, and gave me two whole treacle sticks and part of a third out of his breeches' pocket, in return for which I forgave him freely, and promised to let him hear the sea roar on every Saturday half holiday till farther notice.

MY GODMOTHER'S PICTURE-BOOK.

"And, speaking of Dick and the straw reminds me that my birthday falls on the fifth of November. From this it came about that I always had to bear a good many jokes about being burnt as a Guy Fawkes; but, on the other hand, I was allowed to make a small bonfire of my own, and to have eight potatoes to roast therein, and eight-pennyworth of crackers to let off in the evening. A potato and a penny-worth of crackers for every year of my life.

"On this eighth birthday, having got all the above-named gifts, I cried, in the fulness of my heart, 'There never was such a day!' And yet there was more to come, for the evening coach brought me a parcel, and the parcel was my godmother's picture-book.

"My godmother was a gentlewoman of small means; but she was accomplished. She could make very spirited sketches, and knew how to colour them after they were outlined and shaded in Indian ink. She had a pleasant talent for versifying. She was very industrious. I have it from her own lips that she copied the figures in my picture-book from prints in several different houses at which she visited. They were fancy portraits of characters, most of which were familiar to my mind. There were Guy Fawkes, Punch, his then Majesty the King, Bogy, the Man in the Moon, the Clerk of the Weather Office, a Dunce, and Old Father Christmas. Beneath each sketch was a stanza of my godmother's own composing.

"My godmother was very ingenious. She had been mainly guided in her choice of these characters by the prints

she happened to meet with, as she did not trust herself to design a figure. But if she could not get exactly what she wanted, she had a clever knack of tracing an outline of the attitude from some engraving, and altering the figure to suit her purpose in the finished sketch. She was the soul of truthfulness, and the notes she added to the index of contents in my picture-book spoke at once for her honesty in avowing obligations, and her ingenuity in availing herself of opportunities.

They ran thus:

No. 1.—GUY FAWKES. Outlined from a figure of a warehouseman rolling a sherry cask into Mr. Rudd's wine vaults. I added the hat, cloak, and boots in the finished drawing.

No. 2.—PUNCH. I sketched him from the life.

No. 3.—HIS MOST GRACIOUS MAJESTY THE KING. On a quart jug bought in Cheapside.

No. 4.—BOGY, *with bad boys in the bag on his back.* Outlined from Christian bending under his burden, in my mother's old copy of the "Pilgrim's Progress." The face from Giant Despair.

No. 5 and No. 6.—THE MAN IN THE MOON, *and* THE CLERK OF THE WEATHER OFFICE. From a book of caricatures belonging to Dr. James.

No. 7.—A DUNCE. From a steel engraving framed in rosewood that hangs in my Uncle Wilkinson's parlour.

No. 8.—OLD FATHER CHRISTMAS. From a German book at Lady Littleham's.

CHAPTER II

"MY sister Patty was six years old. We lover each other dearly. The picture-book was almost as much hers as mine. We sat so long together on one big footstool by the fire, with our arms round each other, and the book resting on our knees, that Kitty called down blessings on my godmother's head for having sent a volume that kept us both so long out of mischief.

" 'If books was allus as useful as that, they'd do for me,' said she; and though this speech did not mean much, it was a great deal for Kitty to say; since, not being herself an educated person, she naturally thought that 'little enough good comes of larning.'

"Patty and I had our favourites among the pictures. Bogy, now, was a character one did not care to think about too near bedtime. I was tired of Guy Fawkes, and thought he looked more natural made of straw, as Dick did him. The Dunce was a little too personal; but Old Father Christmas took our hearts by storm; we had never seen anything like him, though nowadays you may get a plaster figure of him in any toy shop at Christmas time, with hair and beard like cotton wool, and a Christmas tree in his hand.

"The custom of Christmas trees came from Germany. I can remember when they were first introduced into England, and what wonderful things we thought them. Now,

every village school has its tree, and the scholars openly discuss whether the presents have been 'good,' or 'mean,' as compared with other trees of former years.

"The first one that I ever saw I believed to have come from good Father Christmas himself; but little boys have grown too wise now to be taken in for their own amusement. They are not excited by secret and mysterious preparations in the back drawing room; they hardly confess to the thrill—which I feel to this day—when the folding doors are thrown open, and amid the blaze of tapers, Mamma, like a Fate, advances with her scissors to give every one what falls to his lot.

"Well, young people, when I was eight years old I had not seen a Christmas tree, and the first picture of one I ever saw was the picture of that held by Old Father Christmas in my godmother's picture-book.

" 'What are those things on the tree?' I asked.

" 'Candles,' said my father.

" 'No, father, not the candles; the other things?'

" 'Those are toys, my son.'

" 'Are they ever taken off?'

" 'Yes, they are taken off, and given to the children who stand round the tree.'

"Patty and I grasped each other by the hand, and with one voice murmured, 'How kind of Old Father Christmas!'

"By and by I asked, 'How old is Father Christmas?'

"My father laughed, and said, 'One thousand eight hundred and thirty years, child,' which was then the year of our

MY SISTER PATTY WAS SIX YEARS OLD.

Lord, and thus one thousand eight hundred and thirty years since the first great Christmas Day.

" 'He *looks* very old,' whispered Patty.

"And I, who was, for my age, what Kitty called 'Bible-learned,' said thoughtfully, and with some puzzledness of mind, 'Then he's older than Methuselah.'

"But my father had left the room, and did not hear my difficulty.

"November and December went by, and still the picture-book kept all its charm for Patty and me; and we pondered on and loved Old Father Christmas as children can love and realize a fancy friend. To those who remember the fancies of their childhood I need say no more.

"Christmas week came, Christmas Eve came. My father and mother were mysteriously and unaccountably busy in the parlour (we had only one parlour), and Patty and I were not allowed to go in. We went into the kitchen, but even here was no place of rest for us. Kitty was 'all over the place,' as she phrased it, and cakes, mince pies, and puddings were with her. As she justly observed, 'There was no place there for children and books to sit with their toes in the fire, when a body wanted to be at the oven all along. The cat was enough for *her* temper,' she added.

"As to puss, who obstinately refused to take a hint which drove her out into the Christmas frost, she returned again and again with soft steps, and a stupidity that was, I think, affected, to the warm hearth, only to fly at intervals, like a football, before Kitty's hasty slipper.

"We had more sense, or less courage. We bowed to Kitty's behests, and went to the back door.

"Patty and I were hardy children, and accustomed to 'run out' in all weathers, without much extra wrapping up. We put Kitty's shawl over our two heads, and went outside. I rather hoped to see something of Dick, for it was holiday time; but no Dick passed. He was busy helping his father to bore holes in the carved seats of the church, which were to hold sprigs of holly for the morrow—that was the idea of church decoration in my young days. You have improved on your elders there, young people, and I am candid enough to allow it. Still, the sprigs of red and green were better than nothing, and, like your lovely wreaths and pious devices, they made one feel as if the old black wood were bursting into life and leaf again for very Christmas joy!

"And, if one only knelt carefully, they did not scratch his nose," added Godfather Garbel, chuckling and rubbing his own, which was large and rather red.

"Well," he continued, "Dick was busy, and not to be seen. We ran across the little yard and looked over the wall at the end to see if we could see anything or anybody. From this point there was a pleasant meadow field sloping prettily away to a little hill about three-quarters of a mile distant; which, catching some fine breezes from the moors beyond, was held to be a place of cure for whooping-cough, or 'kinkcough,' as it was vulgarly called. Up to the top of this Kitty had dragged me, and carried Patty, when we were recovering from the complaint, as I well remember.

It was the only 'change of air' we could afford, and I dare say it did as well as if we had gone into badly drained lodgings at the seaside.

"This hill was now covered with snow, and stood off against the grey sky. The white fields looked vast and dreary in the dusk. The only gay things to be seen were the red berries on the holly hedge, in the little lane—which, running by the end of our backyard, led up to the Hall—and a fat robin redbreast who was staring at me. I was watching the robin, when Patty, who had been peering out of her corner of Kitty's shawl, gave a great jump that dragged the shawl from our heads, and cried:

" 'LOOK!'

CHAPTER III

"I LOOKED. An old man was coming along the lane. His hair and beard were as white as cottonwood. He had a face like the sort of apple that keeps well in winter; his coat was old and brown. There was snow about him in patches, and he carried a small fir tree.

"The same conviction seized upon us both. With one breath we exclaimed, *'It's Old Father Christmas!'*

"I know now that it was only an old man of the place, with whom we did not happen to be acquainted, and that he was taking a little fir tree up to the Hall, to be made into a Christmas tree. He was a very good-humoured old fellow, and rather deaf, for which he made up by smiling and nodding his head a good deal, and saying, 'Aye, aye, *to* be sure!' at likely intervals.

"As he passed us and met our earnest gaze, he smiled and nodded so affably, that I was bold enough to cry, 'Good evening, Father Christmas!'

" 'Same to you!' said he, in a high-pitched voice.

" 'Then you *are* Father Christmas,' said Patty.

" 'And a Happy New Year,' was Father Christmas's reply, which rather put me out. But he smiled in such a satisfactory manner, that Patty went on, 'You're very old, aren't you?'

" 'So I be, miss, so I be,' said Father Christmas, nodding.

" 'Father says you're eighteen hundred and thirty years old,' I muttered.

" 'Aye, aye, to be sure,' said Father Christmas, 'I'm a long age.'

"A *very* long age, thought I, and I added, 'You're nearly twice as old as Methuselah, you know,' thinking that this might not have struck him.

" 'Aye, aye,' said Father Christmas; but he did not seem to think anything of it. After a pause he held up the tree, and cried, 'D'ye know what this is, little miss?'

" 'A Christmas tree,' said Patty.

"And the old man smiled and nodded.

"I leant over the wall, and shouted, 'But there are no candles.'

" 'By and by,' said Father Christmas, nodding as before. 'When it's dark they'll all be lighted up. That'll be a fine sight!'

" 'Toys too, there'll be, won't there?' screamed Patty.

"Father Christmas nodded his head. 'And sweeties,' he added, expressively.

"I could feel Patty trembling, and my own heart beat fast. The thought which agitated us both, was this—'Was Father Christmas bringing the tree to us?' But very anxiety, and some modesty also, kept us from asking outright.

"Only when the old man shouldered his tree, and prepared to move on, I cried in despair, 'Oh, are you going?'

" 'I'm coming back by and by,' said he.

" 'How soon?' cried Patty.

" 'About four o'clock,' said the old man, smiling. 'I'm only going up yonder.'

"And, nodding and smiling as he went, he passed away down the lane.

" 'Up yonder.' This puzzled us. Father Christmas had pointed, but so indefinitely, that he might have been pointing to the sky, or the fields, or the little wood at the end of the Squire's grounds. I thought the latter, and suggested to Patty that perhaps he had some place underground, like Aladdin's cave, where he got the candles, and all the pretty things for the tree. This idea pleased us both, and we amused ourselves by wondering what Old Father Christmas would choose for us from his stores in that wonderful hole where he dressed his Christmas trees.

" 'I wonder, Patty,' said I, 'why there's no picture of Father Christmas's dog in the book.' For at the old man's heels in the lane there crept a little brown and white spaniel, looking very dirty in the snow.

" 'Perhaps it's a new dog that he's got to take care of his cave,' said Patty.

"When we went indoors we examined the picture afresh by the dim light from the passage window, but there was no dog there.

"My father passed us at this moment, and patted my head. 'Father,' said I, 'I don't know, but I do think Old Father Christmas is going to bring us a Christmas tree tonight.'

" 'Who's been telling you that?' said my father. But he passed on before I could explain that we had seen Father Christmas himself, and had had his word for it that he would return at four o'clock, and that the candles on his tree would be lighted as soon as it was dark.

"We hovered on the outskirts of the rooms till four o'clock came. We sat on the stairs and watched the big clock, which I was just learning to read; and Patty made herself giddy with constantly looking up and counting the four strokes, towards which the hour hand slowly moved. We put our noses into the kitchen now and then, to smell the cakes and get warm, and anon we hung about the parlour door, and were most unjustly accused of trying to peep. What did we care what our mother was doing in the parlour?—we who had seen Old Father Christmas himself, and were expecting him back again every moment!

"At last the church clock struck. The sounds boomed heavily through the frost, and Patty thought there were four of them. Then, after due choking and whirring, our own clock struck, and we counted the strokes quite clearly —one! two! three! four! Then we got Kitty's shawl once more, and stole out into the backyard. We ran to our old place, and peeped, but could see nothing.

" 'We'd better get up on to the wall,' I said; and with some difficulty and distress from rubbing her bare knees against the cold stones, and getting the snow up her sleeves, Patty got on the coping of the little wall. I was just struggling after her, when something warm and something cold

coming suddenly against the bare calves of my legs, made me shriek with fright. I came down 'with a run,' and bruised my knees, my elbows, and my chin; and the snow that hadn't gone up Patty's sleeves, went down my neck. Then I found that the cold thing was a dog's nose, and the warm thing was his tongue; and Patty cried from her post of observation, 'It's Father Christmas's dog, and he's licking your legs.'

"It really was the dirty little brown and white spaniel; and he persisted in licking me, and jumping on me, and making curious little noises, that must have meant something if one had known his language. I was rather harassed at the moment. My legs were sore, I was a little afraid of the dog, and Patty was very much afraid of sitting on the wall without me.

" 'You won't fall,' I said to her. 'Get down, will you?' I said to the dog.

" 'Humpty Dumpty fell off a wall,' said Patty.

" 'Bow! wow!' said the dog.

"I pulled Patty down, and the dog tried to pull me down; but when my little sister was on her feet, to my relief, he transferred his attentions to her. When he had jumped at her, and licked her several times, he turned round and ran away.

" 'He's gone,' said I; 'I'm so glad.'

"But even as I spoke he was back again, crouching at Patty's feet, and glaring at her with eyes the colour of his ears.

"YOU WON'T FALL."

"Now Patty was very fond of animals, and when the dog looked at her she looked at the dog, and then she said to me, 'He wants us to go with him.'

"On which (as if he understood our language, though we were ignorant of his) the spaniel sprang away, and went off as hard as he could; and Patty and I went after him, a dim hope crossing my mind—'Perhaps Father Christmas has sent him for us.'

"This idea was rather favoured by the fact that the dog led us up the lane. Only a little way; then he stopped by something lying in the ditch—and once more we cried in the same breath, 'It's Old Father Christmas!'

CHAPTER IV

"RETURNING from the Hall, the old man had slipped upon a bit of ice, and lay stunned in the snow.

"Patty began to cry. 'I think he's dead,' she sobbed.

" 'He is so very old, I don't wonder,' I murmured; 'but perhaps he's not. I'll fetch Father.'

"My father and Kitty were soon on the spot. Kitty was as strong as a man; and they carried Father Christmas between them into the kitchen. There he quickly revived.

"I must do Kitty the justice to say that she did not utter a word of complaint at this disturbance of her labours; and that she drew the old man's chair close up to the oven with her own hand. She was so much affected by the behaviour of his dog, that she admitted him even to the hearth; on which puss, being acute enough to see how matters stood, lay down with her back so close to the spaniel's that Kitty could not expel one without kicking both.

"For our parts, we felt sadly anxious about the tree; otherwise we could have wished for no better treat than to sit at Kitty's round table taking tea with Father Christmas. Our usual fare of thick bread and treacle was to-night exchanged for a delicious variety of cakes, which were none the worse to us for being 'tasters and wasters'—that is, little bits of dough, or shortbread, put in to try the state

of the oven, and certain cakes that had got broken or burnt in the baking.

"Well, there we sat, helping Old Father Christmas to tea and cake, and wondering in our hearts what could have become of the tree. But you see, young people, when I was a child, parents were stricter than they are now. Even before Kitty died (and she has been dead many a long year) there was a change, and she said that 'children got to think anything became them.' I think we were taught more honest shame about certain things than I often see in little boys and girls now. We were ashamed of boasting, or being greedy, or selfish; we were ashamed of asking for anything that was not offered to us, and of interrupting grown-up people, or talking about ourselves. Why, papas and mammas nowadays seem quite proud to let their friends see how bold and greedy and talkative their children can be! A lady said to me the other day, 'You wouldn't believe, Mr. Garbel, how forward dear little Harry is for his age. He has his word in everything, and is not a bit shy! and his papa never comes home from town but Harry runs to ask if he's brought him a present. Papa says he'll be the ruin of him!'

" 'Madam,' said I, 'even without your word for it, I am quite aware that your child is forward. He is forward and greedy and intrusive, as you justly point out, and I wish you joy of him when those qualities are fully developed. I think his father's fears are well founded.'

"But, bless me! nowadays, it's 'Come and tell Mr. Smith what a fine boy you are, and how many houses you can

build with your bricks,' or, 'The dear child wants everything he sees,' or 'Little pet never lets Mamma alone for a minute; does she, love?' But in my young days it was, 'Self praise is no recommendation' (as Kitty used to tell me), or, 'You're knocking too hard at No. One' (as my father said when we talked about ourselves), or, 'Little boys should be seen but not heard' (as a rule of conduct 'in company'), or, 'Don't ask for what you want, but take what's given you and be thankful.'

"And so you see, young people, Patty and I felt a delicacy in asking Old Father Christmas about the tree. It was not till we had had tea three times round, with tasters and wasters to match, that Patty said very gently, 'It's quite dark now.' And then she heaved a deep sigh.

"Burning anxiety overcame me. I leant towards Father Christmas, and shouted—I had found out that it was needful to shout—

" 'I suppose the candles are on the tree now?'

" 'Just about putting of 'em on,' said Father Christmas.

" 'And the presents too?' said Patty.

" 'Aye, aye, *to* be sure,' said Father Christmas, and he smiled delightfully.

"I was thinking what farther questions I might venture upon, when he pushed his cup towards Patty, saying, 'Since you are so pressing, miss, I'll take another dish.'

"And Kitty, swooping on us from the oven, cried, 'Make yourself at home, sir; there's more where these came from. Make a long arm, Miss Patty, and hand them cakes.'

"So we had to devote ourselves to the duties of the table; and Patty, holding the lid with one hand and pouring with the other, supplied Father Christmas's wants with a heavy heart.

"At last he was satisfied. I said grace, during which he stood, and indeed he stood for some time afterwards with his eyes shut—I fancy under the impression that I was still speaking. He had just said a fervent 'Amen,' and reseated himself, when my father put his head into the kitchen, and made this remarkable statement:

" 'Old Father Christmas has sent a tree to the young people.'

"Patty and I uttered a cry of delight, and we forthwith danced round the old man, saying, 'Oh, how nice! Oh, how kind of you!' which I think must have bewildered him, but he only smiled and nodded.

" 'Come along,' said my father. 'Come, children. Come, Reuben. Come, Kitty.'

"And he went into the parlour, and we all followed him.

"My godmother's picture of a Christmas tree was very pretty; and the flames of the candles were so naturally done in red and yellow, that I always wondered that they did not shine at night. But the picture was nothing to the reality. We had been sitting almost in the dark, for, as Kitty said, 'Firelight was quite enough to burn at meal times.' And when the parlour door was thrown open, and the tree, with lighted tapers on all the branches, burst upon our view, the blaze was dazzling, and threw such a glory

round the little gifts, and the bags of coloured muslin with acid drops, and pink rose drops, and comfits inside, as I shall never forget. We all got something; and Patty and I, at any rate, believed that the things came from the stores of Old Father Christmas. We were not undeceived even by his gratefully accepting a bundle of old clothes which had been hastily put together to form his present.

"We were all very happy; even Kitty, I think, though she kept her sleeves rolled up, and seemed rather to grudge enjoying herself (a weak point in some energetic characters). She went back to her oven before the lights were out, and the angel on the top of the tree taken down. She locked up her present (a little work-box) at once. She often showed it off afterwards, but it was kept in the same bit of tissue paper till she died. Our presents certainly did not last so long!

"The old man died about a week afterwards, so we never made his acquaintance as a common personage. When he was buried, his little dog came to us. I suppose he remembered the hospitality he had received. Patty adopted him, and he was very faithful. Puss always looked on him with favour. I hoped during our rambles together in the following summer that he would lead us at last to the cave where Christmas trees are dressed. But he never did.

"Our parents often spoke of his late master as 'old Reuben,' but children are not easily disabused of a favourite fancy, and in Patty's thoughts and in mine the old man was long gratefully remembered as OLD FATHER CHRISTMAS."